

## Nine years

Nine years. Nine years after the war. Nine years after the day my pa died in the bombing. I stand here now, ankle deep in debris. I look at the horizon, the two suns of Umbrae sinking in the North. I am about to climb back down when I see it. I tumble over a dirt mound and dig around the pile of wreckage until I find the item I'm looking for. It's a photograph, yellowed with age and framed in mahogany. It may be dusty with years of neglect, but this photograph is a shred of my childhood. I reach my fingers towards it, almost tentatively. The tips of my digits brush the frame and my mind is overcome with a rush of emotions and memories.

"Pa! Look what I found!" I yelled excitedly, running towards a man with wavy brown hair, tousled by the wind. I clutch a handful of blue and white wildflowers, eager to show them to my pa. "What flowers do you think they are?" he asked, picking me up and spinning me around.

"Blueberry and cheesecake!" I laughed, and he looked at me fondly.

"Come on, I found the perfect spot to take your birthday photo." He grabbed my hand and led me through the thicket of foliage until we came to a babbling brook running downstream. There was a small weeping willow situated on one side of the bank and the branches barely dipped in the clear water. A flat boulder as smooth as the surface of an egg lay beneath the willow tree. I hopped up on the rock and positioned myself in various poses, as pa clicked the camera, choosing the best one to use. "There we go kitten. When we get home, your ma's going to frame it for you, alright?" he grinned at me, tucking the camera away. I beamed and bounced on the balls of my feet as if they had springs on them. I was about to open my mouth to say something when a deafening tremor shook the earth. I looked at pa, confused. "Pa? What was that?" I asked worriedly. He didn't seem to notice I was there. Papa's face was lined with fear and astonishment.

"It really is happening," he mumbled to himself. I tugged at his arm a bit harder as a second rumble vibrated around the ground we stood on. He finally seemed to register I was there and pulled me along, speaking hurriedly as we ran. I could barely hear him as I struggled to keep up. We stopped abruptly at a hollowed tree. He shouldered me despite my squirming and kicking, and pushed me in. I cried out, attempting to get out of the tree and pleading with him to come inside with me. But he made no attempt to move. Instead, he looked me in the eye as several more tremors hit the earth with ear-splitting rumbles. "You must promise me, that no matter what happens, you do not get out of the tree. Only come out when you feel the quakes stop. Promise me." He said, holding my hand through the gap. I sobbed as another tremor hit. "I-I promise," I wept.

"It's going to be alright." He smiled at me and disappeared from my line of view. The biggest tremor yet hit and the world exploded in a fiery landscape of red and orange. Burning foliage and pieces of matter flew into the air as I watched my pa get blown backwards. He never got up again. Turning away, I let my emotions take over me, sobbing hysterically.

I collapse onto the ground, eyes wet with tears. Throwing the photograph onto a patch of dirt next to me, I cry, my chest heaving with years of pain and heartache.

“I-I’m sorry pa. I should’ve been better. I should’ve been stronger.” I look around me at the ruins of the war.

“I failed my duty as a daughter.”